

Fighters on leave

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In August 1914, when the war begins, the belligerents expect a short war and try to bring as many men to the front as possible and to keep them there. Letting men get home before the victory has been achieved is not an option. Correspondence is then almost the only link between the soldiers at the front, and their families, at the rear. Only the wounded can expect to spend a few days at home after their recovery.

Things change with the extension of the conflict beyond the winter 1914/1915, which threatens the morale of civilians and combatants in all societies at war.

The mobilization of civilians is of course essential in the context of total war, and boosting the morale of soldiers is also an emergency because the conditions of life and combat at the front are very difficult. Politicians are also concerned with economic or demographic issues as war goes on and they ask for soldiers to be sent home.

That is why in 1915, the German, the French and the British armies, are gradually up to allow fighters to take a few days off on leave at the rear, and, if possible, to return home.

In practice, these periods of leaves are rare and short during the war, as departures are dependent on the course of military operations, as is the case during the Battle of Verdun in 1916 or during the 1918 offensives.

Leave poses a logistical challenge, because transportation of soldiers for some days at the rear was not expected and adds to the burden on railways, whose strategic priority is the transport of troops on active duty. Transport conditions remain thus very poor throughout the war : soldiers on leave often travel standing in slow, poorly lit and barely heated trains and complain of being treated like "cattle " in poorly equipped transit camps.

The first thing to highlight is that the leave works in very different ways depending on the groups that we consider and are a source of inequality between combatants on several levels:

Firstly, the leaves are not harmonized across Allied armies and some are treated more favorably than others. We can compare the situation of Canadians who are only entitled to a leave of ten days each year and that of the French, the most favored of all the belligerents, who received leave lasting 3 to 10 days, 2 to 3 times per year, which means about 60 days of

leave in total. On the German side, the soldiers had to wait one year at the front to hope to go home for 2 weeks.

It is however in the expeditionary corps, where uprooting is greatest, that the leaves are most critical. Indeed, logistical difficulties, because of submarine warfare in particular and the fear of desertion, often condemn men to spend their leave abroad, and therefore away from their families.

This is the case of imperial soldiers who were sent to camps in the South of France and to England. Canadians have to stay in Paris or London. American soldiers have to stay in France or to go to London as well.

The situation is also very critical in the British Forces. Because of submarine warfare, soldiers are often sent back to the front without leaving the camps bordering the English Channel after their boat had failed to show up.

The British system also creates regional differences, because transportation time is included in the period of leave, which discriminates against men from the northern part of the country.

The soldiers from invaded areas can not return to their homes at all and are looked after by charities, and often spend the entire war without seeing their families.

Large differences also exist between officers and men, as in the British Army where soldiers are allowed a leave every 15 months on average, against one every 3 months for officers.

So we see that the leave system reinforces or creates differences between combatants.

The French army is particularly interesting in this respect for soldiers of the Republic are traditionally very sensitive to equity in this conscript army.

From 1915, they complain about the arbitrary allocation of leave and about the gap between the number of departures announced and what they actually get. These claims are backed up by the press and parliament, which put pressure on the government and the General Staff for improvements for the leave system.

These actions bear fruit and are thus responsible for the organization of the leave system in France in July 1915 by Joffre. This pressure goes on throughout the war and led to the recognition of a right to three annual leaves by autumn of 1916, and to the lengthening of leave in 1917 and 1918.

The link between leave and French political culture is reflected in the significance of leave in the claims of the 1917 mutineers.

At the beginning of the year 1917, thanks to recent reforms, there is no delay in the French leaves, which are, however, suspended in anticipation of the Chemin des Dames offensive. The failure of the latter reveals the state of fatigue of the soldiers and their lack of confidence in their military leaders, whom the rebels accuse of not including a massive increase in departures for units out of the first line.

We often credit Pétain, who succeeds to Nivelle as the head of the French army on May 15, to have finally paid attention to the living conditions of soldiers.

This has to be nuanced with regard to leave because Pétain does not innovate but only enforces the rules that exist, pushing the officers to let the soldiers go home at unprecedented rates of 25 to 50 % for some reserve units, so as not to accumulate later.

In return, he strengthens monitoring of soldiers on leave in trains, at railway stations and at the rear, because he is convinced that the mutinies brewed there, especially in Paris, which is also a way to discard the responsibility of mutinies on the government.

The situation in other countries should be analyzed in more details, but we can already see that the leave's issues can be very different from one country to another. Despite these differences, the leaves have played a critical role in societies at war, which is clearly visible in the French case, currently the best known.

Leave is indeed a key moment in the experience of war, and a symbolic issue of prime importance.

Indeed, the periods of leave are rare, they are short, but they are extremely valuable for families who do not have other opportunities to get together during the war.

This explains why they are frequently mentioned in the letters, and they are one of the most discussed topics at the front. Indeed, leave provides the soldiers, but also their families, with an horizon of expectation in the short term, much more reassuring than the prospects for peace. Going on leave is a way to anticipate "The Great Leave", which will come with peace, and to gather family memories of the war

So, it is clear that leave is one of the best ways for soldiers to forget what they had to go through in the trenches

Once they have arrived at the rear, the intimacy of family reunions is probably the most striking phenomenon, although it is necessary to remember that combatants did not all go home.

Going back home, among their family, men reconnect with activities that take on new meaning because they remind them of peacetime. Many of them are likely to work during their leave, in the fields or in the war factories.

Family activities are often organized according to them and their needs, and thus they are often asked to share their experiences of the war, which allows civilians to have some knowledge of the realities of the front, even if the fighters do not tell everything.

Periods of leave thus create concrete links between the front and rear, fighting back the business of censorship.

However, the reunion is not always easy, and soldiers often express a sense of disconnection from civilians.

Some distance remains, especially with children disturbed by changes in the appearance of the soldiers.

Similarly, there are often tensions between the soldiers and their wives, as they suspect infidelity because of the many rumors circulating at the front.

In fact, infidelity is not a mass phenomenon, and their fear is more the product of the discrepancy between the sexual fantasies of combatants and the difficulty in recreating intimacy.

For their part, however, single soldiers are often disappointed by the attitude of women, who appear to be less open minded than what they read in the newspapers.

This demand leads to an explosion of prostitution in Paris, where many French and Allied soldiers stay on leave, especially around the Gare du Nord and Gare de l'Est where they arrive from and leave for the front.

The high demand for entertainment is also reflected in their taste for the cinema, especially for fiction, which they much prefer than the "brainwashing" war news.

In town, they play an important role in the revival of commercial activities that had slowed since 1914, like cafes and restaurants. However, the soldiers on leave also bitterly feel the gap between the living conditions of civilians and those of combatants, and can't stand the complaints of those they consider sometimes as shirkers.

Leaves are also marked by numerous transgressions of discipline, beginning with excesses in trains. Fraud is a massive practice among French soldiers on leave. They are frequently late to return to the front, and a culture of absence without leave emerges among the fighters, who share the tricks to falsify documents, to get out of stations in hiding, or to hide in Paris.

The time of the return to the front feels like another tearing apart of the family because soldiers know they might never see their loved ones again.

Upon their return to the front, the primary group of combatants is called upon to help the soldier overcome his depression, while the latter, as the price of his stay in the rear, must share the news from the rear as well as the food he brought back.

So we see that the periods of leave have played a vital role in supporting the morale of the people during the war, allowing some families to come together, and fighters to rest.

As such, they are a critical key to understanding the endurance of soldiers, as well as the strength of the links between civilians and combatants, which proves very useful to the social cohesion during and after the war.